UNIT 2

Black Ink[16]

Sanjaya Kumar Bag

About the Author

Of all the young Dalit literary artists of contemporary Odisha, Sanjaya Kumar Bag (b. 1976) is perhaps the most talented and perceptive recorder of the subaltern reality. He earned his PhD from the University of Delhi on folklore studies, and currently teaches at the Eastern Regional Language Centre, Bhubaneshwar. A young, promising author in his thirties, Sanjaya is quite confident of making his voice heard in the literary circle. His is a tale of much suffering and humiliation that finally helped him to emerge bravely.

Sanjaya Kumar Bag has been writing short stories in Odia since 2001. *Barnabodha O Madhubabunka Katha*, an anthology of short fiction, was published in 2009. Another anthology, *Birnangdevi Ebang Jhinjoli Dangar Talara Katha*, will soon be published. As a scholar of folklore, Sanjaya published a volume titled *Paschima Odishara Paramparika Kreeda: Eka Lokatattwika Adhayana*, a folkloristic work on traditional games, in 2008. He also wrote a theoretical work on the concept of folklore and contemporary folkloristics—*Lokadhara: Paramparika Sarjanasila Jibanadharara Adhayana*—in 2012. Some of his stories have been translated into Assamese, Hindi and English. The Hindi translation of *Barnabodha O Madhubabunka Katha* has been included in the Hindi (MA) syllabus of IGNOU, New Delhi.

[16] Original title "Kalasyahi" (in Odia).

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Authorspeak

"I come from a great Indian village where caste is everything—it is not only a component of the community life, but also a decisive factor in economy, education, identity, politics, and culture. My father was the younger son of a Gaṇā, who worked as a village Chowkidar, next to Gauntia (the Jamindar), and was privileged to cultivate some amount of land. He had a keen interest in education and always considered learning as the greatest wealth of this world. As he read from the primer at that time, he tried to inspire me to read—to acquire knowledge. I offered a vivid description of this childhood event in my autobiographical story "Barnabodha O Madhubabunka Katha". My grandfather and his fellow workers could not even collect drinking water from the public pond or well. They had to wait for someone from the upper caste to pour it from a great height into their pot. My father had great faith in *Ganatantra* (democracy) and education; he always believed that in educated and democratic India caste-based discrimination would not happen. So he was hopeful without understanding the factors responsible for the prevalence of Dalit suffering even in this modern democratic nation".

Pre-text Discussion

'Black Ink' is a narrative of electoral practice in India and the Dalit community therein. Our representatives are elected by voting, and choosing the right candidate is not the aim. It turns out to be a futile exercise not only for Dalits and tribals, but for a large number of illiterates. The story is narrated by referring to Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation. The Dalit man's dream of Independence is shattered by others. The ghost of Gandhi and his followers continue to haunt the chief character.

The original Odia title of the story is 'Kalasyahi'—the indelible ink used in elections. The story is not only about electoral practice. It is also about the struggle for independence and privilege.

Black Ink

The Speeches Gandhiji Made and My Budhadada Who Could Not Understand Them

The day our country got independence, Gandhiji was present in our village. He sat under the banyan tree in the school compound.

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When the tri-colour flags made waves all over the country and the national anthem was heard everywhere, Gandhiji broke the news of India's Independence achieved after a long struggle.

Some people in our village were surprised and asked him, "What is a country?" "What is Independence?" because they had neither seen any tri-colour flag nor heard the national anthem before. They could not grasp what Gandhiji explained to them. In fact, many people of our village look foolish because being ignorant, they do not understand many things. Gandhiji, it seems, had said, "Kingship is over. We now have democracy. There will be elections. People will choose their own representatives and form their own government". Later the Gauntia of our village had explained Gandhiji's speech to the people in simple language.

But for a very long time my Budhadada could not understand how kingship had ended. Neither did he understand Gandhiji, nor democracy nor even India's independence. That was because, the day Gandhiji had come to our village, Budhadada was busy preparing the Gauntia's paddy field which was to be sown the next day. He had just heard all those terms from others.

Gandhiji, it seems, was a Mahatma—a god in the form of a man. When he walked, a lotus bloomed under every step he took. The moment he blessed the poor, their sufferings disappeared. When he touched sick people they were cured. Just like Krishna crushed Kalia, Gandhiji defeated the British. He fought a lot for our country's freedom. Therefore people, as a mark of respect, collected dust from his feet and smeared it on their foreheads. By doing so they felt blessed. All this, made my Budhadada very sad. He was obsessed with Gandhiji. So he went straight to the premises of the school at midnight and collected a little dust from the place where Gandhiji had sat. He then smeared it on his forehead. He could not sleep that night. The next day, early in the morning when he went to complete his work he asked the Gauntia about Gandhiji. The Gauntia chided him saying that Gandhiji had wanted to see him and being unable to do so, had left rather sadly. Believing this to be a joke, my Budhadada made no reply but in his heart of hearts he wished to meet Gandhiji in future.

Contrary to Gandhiji's declaration, kingship continued. The Gauntia was all in all. Whatever he decided, was the law in the

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entire village. When he ordered someone to do something no one dared to refuse him. Actually, the Gauntia was the local king. He had hundreds of acres of land. All the landless labourers and poor peasants worked in his fields. Did he pay any wage? Hah! If the Gauntia willed it one could not get a roof over one's head. Following this convention, my Budhadada, leaving his own land, went to work the Gauntia's fields. Otherwise, the Gauntia would take away the land which he had given him freely. To work for the Gauntia for free was nothing new. People were used to it. In the distant past there was no Gauntia system in the village. The local king brought him from somewhere and installed him in the village. The Gauntia was a Brahmin by caste who looked like a god and was close to the king. Therefore people treated him like a god. Because he was very powerful, my Budhadada dared not say anything against him.

For a long time my Budhadada could not understand how kingship had come to an end and democracy had begun. Once in a while he would ask people what Gandhiji had actually said. He would also ask them what democracy and Independence really meant. But he would never get a right answer. The Gauntia would now and then call him to work as a free labourer. Abandoning all his work, my grandfather would run to work for the Gauntia even though he had no interest in doing so.

After a few years of Independence, whenever elections were round the corner, people wearing clean white khadi clothes came to our village. Like Gandhiji, they also declared that kingship was over and democracy was on the right track. Along with such rhetoric they made long speeches. In between their speeches they would shout "Jindabad, Jindabad" and request the villagers to cast their votes on certain symbols. My Budhadada could never make anything of their speeches. So he, like many others, would be baffled and look foolish.

But one thing he did understand was that something called the 'election' had arrived. The day he cast his vote for the first time, he got a black ink mark on his finger. He was very happy that day. He went to everyone and, showing the black mark, said, "See, I have cast my vote". The black mark on his finger was both democracy and Independence for him.

My Budhadada was very happy because voting took place in the same school where Gandhiji had earlier announced India's

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Independence. Before casting his vote he went to the banyan tree where Gandhiji had sat and bowed to it with reverence. He felt sorry for not having been able to see Gandhiji, his eyes filled with tears. Someone had told my Budhadada that Gandhiji would visit the village again during the election and speak about Independence. He would also explain how people could choose the representatives who would rule them. This made my Budhadada very happy. He requested all our neighbours to go and cast their votes. He thought, leaving all his work aside that this time he would definitely go to see Gandhiji. He would go and collect dust from his feet. He would listen to him carefully. My Budhadada was sure that Gandhiji would come once again.

But Gandhiji never came to our village again. He had come only once, the day our country got Independence. Nevertheless, my Budhadada eagerly waited for his second coming.

The Nine-layered Sacred Thread, Ma Brundabati and Good Deeds of Previous Births

The day Gandhiji had come to our village it was the Gauntia who had sat very close to him and talked a lot. No one else had the courage to sit by Gandhiji. The Gauntia had discussions with Gandhiji on many topics, such as our country, independence, democracy, etc. Later he explained those topics to the villagers in simple language. Gandhiji had been so impressed by the Gauntia's depth of knowledge that he had patted him. The villagers were also surprised to witness the Gauntia's capacity to talk so wisely. They realized that he was worthy of their salutes from a distance of not less than ten feet. During election, the Gauntia was out on the street. The khadi clothes he wore suited his personality. As such, he was the head of the village. So no one disobeyed him because they knew that the representative would be a man of his choosing. To tell you the truth, there was no one in the village to challenge his leadership. Whomsoever he chose as representative, people voted for that person. As such, he had discussions with Gandhiji on Independence, democracy, the right to vote, and so on. Therefore, people could not think of giving their votes to anyone else.

My Budhadada told us that the Gauntia once came to our neighbourhood. That day people of our locality had realized that

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the Independence Gandhiji had talked about was really true. Otherwise, how was it possible for the Gauntia to come to our locality? In the past the Gauntia never came to our little universe. If he needed anyone's service he would call him through his *halia*, his servant. Once the *halia* called someone's name, the work was supposed to be done by that person. People left their own work even though it was important and attended to the Gauntia's work instantly. When the Gauntia came to our neighbourhood on the day of election, he instructed our people to cast their votes on certain symbols. He said, "Vote for this symbol. This symbol belongs to you. If you vote for this, our country will change for the better. The country will reap gold". Without bothering to even look at the symbol, our people voted for it. The Gauntia further said, "It is not I who am telling you to vote on this symbol. It is Gandhiji who has instructed us. This is Gandhiji's symbol. You are voting for Gandhiji". The reference to Gandhiji was enough. People went mad hearing his name. It was a heavenly experience for each one of them. They forgot everything. They had to choose their own representative and therefore they cast their votes. There was black ink on everyone's finger. People were really happy to be associated with Gandhiji.

While asking for their vote, the Gauntia took out his nine-layered sacred thread and asked everyone to touch it as a form of pledge. The people of our locality were astonished. This they thought must really be Independence. Otherwise, how could they touch the sacred thread of the Gauntia, whom they would, otherwise, pay respect to from a distance? When the black ink was smeared on their fingers they did not see anything. They just voted. When my Budhadada was narrating this event, we thought we were listening to a fairy tale. He said, "It must be the good deeds of the past that I was able to touch the nine-layered sacred thread in this life". He then started describing the nine different gods represented by each layer of the sacred thread. How did he come to know these things? Everything had been narrated by the Gauntia himself. My Budhadada was very happy at the coming of democracy. He virtually worshipped Gandhiji.

After meeting Gandhiji and interacting closely with him, the Gauntia began to appear like Gandhiji. While Gandhiji had come only once to talk about Independence, the Gauntia came again

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and again to explain about very many things. In the meantime the Gauntia had changed so much that he started explaining about Independence, votes, etc. even to the women of our locality. None of them had been able to either listen to or understand Gandhiji's speech. So they listened to the Gauntia attentively. Above all, he was the head of the village. So no one disobeyed him. The day the Gauntia came to our place to talk about democracy, he brought a *tulsi* plant along with him and installed it in the centre so that people could worship it. He then asked everyone to take a vow and vote for his candidate. It was amazing to see a *tulsi* plant in the Dom locality. At first, the women in our neighbourhood were surprised. They could not believe that they were so fortunate now as to be able to worship Ma Brundabati by offering *dhupa* (incense), lamp and water. They could not decide whom to be grateful to for this: Gandhiji or the Gauntia. They could not hide their elation and happiness. They could not tell anyone how happy they were. While casting their votes they could only remember Ma Brundabati. Their votes came like their ululations. My Budhadada told us that everyone in our locality was really happy. They were happy because, first, they had had an opportunity to touch the nine-layered sacred thread and second, they now had Ma Brundabati installed. They were equally happy the day Gandhiji had visited their village. They waited expectantly for Gandhiji, hoping that he would come again during election.

Once Again Krishna Touched the Donkey's Feet: The Honest Businessman

No doubt there was magic in Gandhiji's words. But now the new attraction was the super-fine khadi clothes. When elections came, apart from the Gauntia many others came out to the street, asking for votes. They explained to the simple-minded people through their speeches about democracy and people's voting rights. It so happened that one day our Harisir's son came out to fight the election, wearing khadi clothes.

When I was studying in the seventh class Harisir was the headmaster in our Middle-English school. One day while he was teaching us literature he compared voting to the spring season and said that voting was more enjoyable than the joy of spring. We,

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of course, could not understand the significance of the statement because we were not yet eighteen years old, not yet citizens of our country. However, we were happy to listen to the songs coming from the loud speakers and to see the flags waving during the election. We used to think, should we reach eighteen years tonight then we could enjoy the voting season. But it was never possible. After coming back from school that day I narrated to my Budhadada what Harisir had stated but Budhadada understood nothing at all.

It was getting clearer that after the Gauntia, Harisir's son would be the representative of the village. He used to move from place to place to explain about the importance of voting. Once while making a speech in our neighbourhood he said, "I am hungry. Give me something to eat". It shocked everyone. The elders were hugely worried that this could happen only in the Kaliyuga. They recollected how they were quite fortunate to have touched the sacred thread and worshipped the 'tulsi' plant only by the goodness of the Gauntia. And now democracy could do another magic. Did Gandhiji say so? Remembering him, they felt intense gratitude towards him. Actually Harisir's son was the Gauntia's nephew. How could they share their food with a high-caste person? Noting their reluctance, Harisir's son reminded them about the speech Gandhiji had delivered about equality. He had clearly stated that there was no difference between the Brahmin and the Dom and that everyone was equal to everyone else. He also reminded them about how Gandhiji himself had partaken of the food—watered rice and green leaves of cauliflower—from Madhu, one of their relations. Finally, with reluctance Harisir's son was given watered rice with roasted dried fish from Nari's house. It was a great event for the people of our locality.

The news that Harisir's son had eaten cooked food from the Dom *pada* spread to every nook and corner of the village. How could he, a Brahmin, take food from an untouchable home considered to be a hundred times more 'polluting' than liquor. Everyone in his family cursed him and prevented him from entering his home. But Harisir's son went on defending his act by arguing that he could not bear the charges made by the opposition which accused his family members of deliberately keeping the Doms in darkness for so long. As a slap on their faces, he decided to eat food prepared by the Doms so that they could be proved wrong. This explanation

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of Harisir's son was immediately accepted by the Gauntia. He supported him arguing that there was nothing wrong in eating a little food from the Doms. In the age of democracy what was important was to get support from the maximum number of people so that finally the elections could be won. He told him how in order to get support from the Doms in the past he had asked them to touch his sacred thread without bothering about pollution. He also cited a reference from the *Purana* saying how during a time of need, Krishna had to touch a donkey's feet. Everyone now accepted the Gauntia's explanations. Truly enough, when the election result came out Harisir's son was declared victorious. He was then taken in a procession with garlands.

The people in our little world were really happy. In just one visit of Gandhiji they had already witnessed several happenings. They expected that if Gandhiji came once again there would be many other changes. But Gandhiji never came. My Budhadada waiting for Gandhiji so long finally passed away. Just before breathing his last he asked someone, like a mad fellow, to go out and look for whether Gandhiji had finally come. My Budhadada died without seeing Gandhiji and there were still many others who had neither seen him nor understood the meaning of Independence, democracy, etc. They hoped that one day Gandhiji would surely come and whenever there was an election they would ask whether Gandhiji was around.

Snacks and Tea, Liquor and the Great Democracy

When the elections arrived, it was not just the Gauntia or Harisir's son but a whole lot of people who came out to talk about democracy. They made great speeches, greater than Gandhiji's, explaining many things in simple language. They ran from one place to another whether it was the height of summer or winter, midday or midnight. They would canvass for their candidates, asking for votes while accusing their opponents and calling them thieves. They urged people not to be afraid of anyone since they belonged to an independent country.

Interestingly, on the day of election, Nari from our neighbourhood was seen standing at the corner of the school, offering snacks and tea

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to the voters. This was the same Nari from whose home Harisir's son had eaten watered rice and roasted dried fish. Nari, after serving snacks and tea, would secretly give the voters a ten-rupee note and instruct them to cast their votes on such and such symbol. People could never understand anything. After having their breakfast they collected their note and went to cast their votes.

Generally the voting took place at the school verandah where Gandhiji had made speeches. At the back of the school was the canteen where Nari gave out ten-rupee notes for liquor. On witnessing such a scene some people were reminded of the greatness of democracy that Gandhiji had talked about. But those people who had snacks and liquor were quite thrilled that just for one vote they could get so many things freely. When they got drunk, they thought they had the real taste of democracy. But some people thought that Gandhiji should have made these things clear in his speeches. People of our locality, however, could not recollect what Gandhiji had really said. Therefore, they were anxious to hear him once again. Whenever there was an election they would run, hoping that Gandhiji would be there.

India Shining and The 'Bald Head' of Gandhiji Moving Around at Midnight

This time the election was somewhat different. It was also quite mysterious. While some people said that the country was shining like silver, the others compared it with a diamond. Some others compared the country shining with Vajpayee's smile. And the statement that our country was shining was a fact. Our village was proof of this. Actually the majority of the people in our village were smiling along with Vajpayee. When they cast their votes, it felt like there were smiling lotuses imprinted on their forefingers.

Everyone thought that India was not just shining but was also smiling. In future she would continue to shine like the stars and smile Buddha's eternal smile. All the miseries of the country were over. Henceforth people would live happily, and as if to prove this, many people dressed in white khadi and carried lots of money with them. There were songs on the theme of India shining. They also emphasized the idea of India-progressing in their speeches and asked for votes. Although the majority of the people in our village

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understood them and felt happy, there were some others who could not understand them. So, all eyes were focused on the latter group. Their votes were the target. The campaigners had realized that their speeches were not enough to win over the confidence of these people. They also knew that giving them some snacks, tea or liquor for their votes was not enough. The greed of these people had risen with every election. In a democracy it was difficult to control others.

The people who could not understand many of the speeches during daytime suddenly found many scraps of paper with the image of Gandhiji's bald head falling all around their *pada*. Actually the bald heads were not just flying around; there were also marks encircled on those foreheads. People understood that those were the election symbols. Those who had not known anything about Gandhiji were so happy to have got the five-hundred-rupees note. Along with the note, there were requests coming from behind to vote for so and so. Seeing the image of the bald head of Gandhiji on the notes, many of them were really afraid because they had waited for so long to listen to him on independence, democracy, etc. Their hearts began to thud.

Sagadia Dadi who was a contemporary of my Budhadada and had heard enough about democracy was astonished at the images of Gandhiji's bald head. At first he had a mild shock but after a moment when he recovered, he started jumping, catching all the notes floating down to us. People whose hearts had been beating fearfully now gathered around him asking him what had happened. Sagadia Dadi started making speeches. He said, "Those people who are now talking about Independence and democracy, they have magical charms and that is how they have controlled Gandhiji and sent his bare heads to us. Do not be afraid of their charms. Give me all the heads. I'll do the needful". He gathered all the notes. Seeing the naked heads of Gandhiji, he further said, "After meeting the Gauntia you left and never came back. We waited for you so long. But you never bothered to come to meet us. Finally you have come as a ghost. Why did you come at midnight to trouble us? Let's go. I'll take you to the end of the village where the three roads meet and bury your troubling spirit there for your final rehabilitation". Saying so he started tearing up all the notes.

— *Translated from Odia by Raj Kumar*

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Exercises

1. Who was the 'Gauntia' of the village? What was his role in the village administration?
2. What are the evils of the 'Gauntia' system in the village? Are there similar mechanisms in your locality?
3. What were the godly activities of Gandhiji? Why is he compared to Lord Krishna?
4. Upper castes allowed the untouchables to plant tulsi in their locality during the election campaign. What is the significance of this gesture in the context of the story?
5. How were Doms purchased by upper castes at election time? Why did they depute Nari, an untouchable, to bribe the voters of his own community?

Activity

Attempt to write the speeches of leaders of different political parties on the eve of general elections in your area. Highlight how they refer to Gandhi and other great leaders.

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